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SHI'ITE LEADER FADLALLAH MONDAY MORNING INTERVIEW

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[Interview with Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, Shi'ite leader, by MONDAY MORNING REPORTER Sandra A. Malih, "last week"; place not given]

[Text][Malih] Who is Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah?

[Fadlallah] If I were to bypass personal features and physical characteristics I would say that I am a person who lives to fulfill my duty as a human being, as a thinker, as a Moslem, and as a citizen, in order to raise the standards of the people who nobody cares for to a higher level. Consequently, I believe that every human being should consider all his resources as a trust from God for others. As such, a person who uses his resources in an irresponsible manner betrays this trust.

Contrary to all the distorted images portrayed by the media, I am not a person who operates on the assumption that violence is the best method in life. I believe that everything can be solved by dialogue, and all issues can be resolved through sound methods that respect the humanity of the human being, and seek to change the convictions of people through intellectual persuasion. This is the best method. I believe that in all cases violence is like a surgical operation that the doctor should only resort to after he has exhausted all other methods.

We feel that in Lebanon, where every person has freedom of expression, be it on the religious level or in terms of non-religious thought, and has the right to publicly advocate his views, nobody has the right to impose his views on others. On the contrary, we believe that violence cannot achieve these results for the individual, and it is more probable that violence will end up leading to negative rather than positive results.

Consequently, even though we adhere to Islamic thought, we recognize the rights of others to embrace Christian thought, or, for that matter, communist thought or some other ideology. However, we owe it to one another and to the public to try to present a clear image of this thought, and not to let ideological differences become the basis for fighting or strife.

We believe that Lebanon should always be the center for ideologies that engage in dialogue and debate, and which also seek to express themselves in practical, but civilized ways.

[Walih] What are the principal religious views of a political nature that you advocate?

[Faddallah] My understanding of religion does not distinguish between religious and secular, except for the fact that religion differs from other forms of thought in that it is linked to the metaphysical, whereas other forms of thought deal with reality. When we say that religion is linked to the metaphysical, we are not implying that all life involves the metaphysical. Religion emanates from the metaphysical, but in action it is linked to life and reality. As such, we can consider religious thought to be a form of thought.

We believe that the basic objective of religion is to provide justice to all people, regardless of their differences. The Koran explains the reason for the sending of messages and messengers by saying, "that mankind may observe right measures," which refers to justice, namely, that every person be given what is rightfully his. If we perceive justice to be the basis of the message, we can differentiate between justice and any political move, because justice is not established by mere sermons and advice. It must be injected into life by practical organization designed to secure for people, in a practical manner, their rights, to confront the challenges that face the weak of society who reel under undesirable conditions imposed on them, and to confront the groups that attempt to crush the freedom and free will of people and try to deprive them of their right to selfdetermination.

We are striving, as Moslems, citizens and human beings, within this political context, to prevent our country from coming under the dominant hegemony that seeks to put pressure on people and to restrict their freedoms. We believe in equitable opportunities and balanced rights.

Regionally, we believe that no country, no regional camp has the right to restrict the freedom of people, whoever the regional camp might be.

On the international level, we oppose colonialism with all our modest resources, I do not imply that we can really confront colonialism in the full sense of the word, but we feel that every person should say "no" to colonialism, because it eliminates humanity, human beings, and human freedom.

Because of our religious conviction, we are opposed to oppression,

be it internal, regional or international. We only possess very modest resources, which we are seeking to expand, and which are available to back all who seek freedom in this world.

[Malih] Shi'ites in Lebanon have been accused of seeking to impose hegemony and of practicing mental and armed terrorism. What is your comment?

[Fadlallah] I ask the accusers to present their evidence, and I wonder where these rumors came from. These rumors were circulated because the Shi'ites got involved in the military situation. However, other groups also got militarily involved. The military situation was not really a popular situation, but a response to the Palestinian situation and the conditions in the Middle East. They are people who have rights, and they got involved on this basis, within a Lebanese context, which, in turn, has interacted with regional and international conditions.

[Malih] What is your view on the relation between religion and the state or the separation of religion from state?

[Fadlallah] At this point we must make a distinction between the state of one religious party or the state with a vast majority of one view, in which religion is the state, and the situation like Lebanon, which is one of diversity. The Moslem scholar must advocate the system that he believes should be applied, but when the situation is not suitable for such application, he must maintain his principles and not be inconsistent, in order to convince the other party, as is the case in all intellectual confrontations.

However, before trying to reach the objective of convincing others by resorting to the familiar, civilized methods of persuasion, he must coexist with others. He must learn to respect the views of others if he is to ask others to respect his views.

[Malih] Some Shi'ites think that they are still being persecuted, and that the explosive reaction to this state is manifested in the situation in Iran, and in political and social upheaval in Lebanon. What do you think?

[Fadlallah] The situation in Iran is not one of Shi'ites being persecuted, because the regime in Iran did not emerge as the result of a Shi'ite reaction against a non-Shi'ites situation. It emerged as a reaction against a Shi'ite king, as the result of a confrontation with a system of government that was Shi'ite and, generally speaking, respected Shi'ite observances. As such, the events of Iran cannot be described as a backlash to the persecution of Shi'ites. In fact, the revolutionary leadership advocated the concept that Islam should be the rule of life. This was similar to the Marxist revolution against the Czar.

In such cases, ideology benefits from the negative conditions which prevail in society at the time, such as persecution, deprivation, and suffering. The ideology that emerged in Iran was Islamic, and called for the application of Islam to all phases of law and government. Generally speaking, it benefitted from both the internal and regional conditions, and used provocation to bring people back to their religious roots. As such, the Iranian situation cannot be described as a reaction to persecution which the Shi'ites might feel, because the Iranian society is Shi'ite.

In Lebanon, the Shi'ites are in a state of confrontation with persecution and deprivation, and so on. We must admit, however, that Shi'ism has benefitted from the state of violence that has prevailed in Lebanon. It became involved in violence in Lebanon,

which, in turn, drew upon the violence in the region arising from the Palestinian problem and the Middle East conflict.

The state of the Shi'ites is the same as that of all persecuted peoples. The pattern of violence, however, arises from the condition prevailing in the area. The present state of violence that has engulfed the Shi'ites is not a Shi'ite feature, but is rather an oriental state. In other words it is a state of emotional reaction that grips the orientals.

We consider that the Palestinians are in a state of violence, that the Arab area that has come in close contact with the Palestinian struggle is also in a state of violence. Otherwise, how would be explain the military coups and the present upheaval? Many who are analysing the Shi'ite situation are looking at the Shi'ites out of the context of the conditions that currently prevail in the area, and in isolation from similar states of other Lebanese communities.

There is a definite media bias designed to focus studies of violence on the state of the Shi'ites, to the exclusion of the other factions, in an open bid to portray this state as posing a threat to Lebanon and the region. It then follows that an appeal is made for cooperation to confront this "threat." I personally believe that this approach and this attempt to portray the Shi'ite state as being unique is part of a media scheme that is not merely Lebanese, but could be Lebanese, regional and international.

[Malih] Do you feel that the Shi'ites of Lebanon are the target of a conspiracy in which both internal and external parties are involved?

[Fadlallah] There is a conspiracy, backed by internal and external forces, against all who reject colonialism. The Shi'ites are a target, not because of some Shi'ite characteristic or peculiarity, but because of their stand. It is a plot against the individual who does not compromise, against those who pursue their objectives directly, without accepting settlements. It is this state that is feared, the state of standing for what you believe in and seek to achieve. If the labels and positions were changed, any other groups would be treated in the same way.

In the beginning the Palestinians were in the right state, which is the reason why various means were used to subvert them and break them, until they were tamed and have become part of the "game."

I believe that the pressure exerted by the media and by others against the Shi'ites is part of an attempt to subject the Shi'ites to a similar fate, an attempt that involves the taming of the Shi'ites, so that they will be "nice" and will "fall in line."

[Malih] To what extent has this effort succeeded?

[Fadlallah] In my estimation, this attempt has so far failed because the actual situation now is one of confidence in the present stand and in the future. There is confidence that religious thought is a vital element in giving the individual strength to stand firm in the face of challenges and storms.

[Malih] Could it be that the fears expressed over the Shi'ite

upsurge arise from the fact that religion and politics, in this context, are inseparable, whereas the Palestinian cause was not a religious issue, only a political one?

[Fadlallah] The religious issue is not determined by moods or emotions. The issue has its checks, which are part of the checks that exist on the political stage. The difference is that, generally, the political stage is a stage that does not depend much on truth. The religious element is valuable because it gives political activists involved in working for the issues of others stability by injecting the truth into their work and ways.

I believe that we can only cope with the challenges that face us if we are truthful. Even though we consider that the Israelis are the enemies of our cause, yet we must objectively admit that the Israelis are honest in their strategy, even though their tactics are deceitful. Likewise, even though we are admittedly the political opponents of the Phalangists, I say that they are honest in their strategy, even though they might resort to devious tactics.

We believe that the present Shi'ite position could be a more honest one, and that the individual could be more committed to his cause, but naturally not inflexible. As such, even when we make a move within the realm of the religious or the Islamic field, we move firmly, but with flexibility. We believe that there is room for flexibility, dialogue, and cooperation with others for the common cause. Religious thought does not remove the individual from such a context.

[Malih] Do you call for the creation of an Islamic state in Lebanon, while preserving the Christian entity, and how do you think that can be realized?

[Fadlallah] When we think of an Islamic state, we base our ideas on Islamic thought expressed within the framework of the state. As I said at first, we think of an Islamic state in the event that its objective premises were realized, which is not the case at present. In this we are exactly like the Marxist who thinks about setting up a Marxist state in Lebanon: How does he think? They probably think in terms of giving to those with whom they differ a measure of freedom which depends on their policies.

As far as Islam is concerned, if an Islamic state were set up this would not in any way infringe on Christian thought. The difference between Islamic thought and Christian thought is theological. Christian thought considers Christ to be God in a certain, philosophical way, whereas Islam considers him to be God's messenger. Laying aside the theological aspects, we do find no differences in the moral standards advocated by Christianity and Islam. Therefore, generally speaking, life, morals, individual and social conduct standards as advocated by Christianity do not differ from the moral and conduct standards advocated by Islam. In what way do Christianity and Islam differ? Islam has canon law (Shari'a), whereas Christianity does not. Christianity says that we must all become one with Christ, and we must not confront legal issues as Christians. There is no legal framework.

[Malih] Could this be due to the fact that, unfortunately, religious prejudices run deeper than political bias?

[Fadlallah] If we really want to be civilized, we do not necessarily

cancel out a state which has become entangled and complex, we simply change the approach. In this modern age, we simply must hold dialogue.

[Malih] Are you saying that it is easier for a Moslem to live within an Islamic state than it is for him to live within a secular or a Christian state?

[Fadlallah] The problem of Moslem is the dualism arising from the difference between what is lawful on the level of the state and what is lawful on the level of faith. The problem of Islam is that it does not have a legal vacuum. Consequently, when a Moslem lives in a state that does not adopt Islam, his life remains confused because of the dualism that he is living under.

The Christian, by contrast, does not have this problem when living in an Islamic society. It is true that he might face certain psychological situations, and there might be certain sensitivities, and he might have a feeling of being deprived of his freedom. In fact, in Marxist societies he might even feel persecuted by being deprived of freedom. Even some capitalist societies might exert various forms of pressure in a bid to alienate people from Christianity.

Christianity in France and America is not at ease today. Why? Christianity is under extreme pressure from secularization, exerted through civilized methods, designed to undermine the faith of the people. We cannot describe the Europeans or the Americans of today as Christians. They are either uninterested in religion or outright agnostics and unbelievers.

Under an Islamic system, the Christians would live in exactly the same way that they would under any other system. Naturally, there would be fine differences depending on different circumstances and on the way basic principles are actually practiced. The possibility does exist that in an Islamic state there would be an exploitation of Islam which would even be directed against other Moslems, as is the case in some situations today.

[Malih] How do the historic Shi'ite-Sunnite differences affect the situation on the local scene in Lebanon?

[Fadlallah] I believe we have reached the stage in Lebanon at which we have narrowed down the Shi'ite-Sunnite rift. Both Sunnites and Shi'ites have started to think in a united way. The sectarian system of the country seeks to create tension and differences, but the latest experiences have brought us together, and incidents have not overcome the spirit of unity.

Consequently, no real Shi'ite-Sunnite dispute has been provoked. At the slightest provocation, scholars and people of goodwill on both sides immediately defuse the situation. Lebanon is actually a model for the Islamic world, demonstrating how Shi'ites and Sunnites can live together in harmony, without the tension that prevails between the two sides in other parts of the world. This encourages those who sincerely call for Islamic unity to double their efforts to achieve this objective.

[Malih] How do you explain Sunni fears of Shi'ite hegemony?

[Fadlallah] I think that people are being scared, rather than are

afraid. I do not believe that thinking Sunnites have this problem. There is no such thing as Shi'ite hegemony in the political sense. It is true that the majority of the armed elements within West Beirut are Shi'ites, and there is no real Sunni armed presence. When people who are unarmed are faced with armed people, especially when infractions and violations of the law occur, they are bound to feel insecure.

However, given greater understanding, and the punishment of all infractions and violations, I believe it is possible to greatly reduce the elements of fear, if not cancel it completely.

[Malih] Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah is accused of being a religious fanatic. How do you respond to this accusation?

[Fadlallah] People who say this should read the writings of Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and listen to his lectures, and follow his daily routine of social life. They will then discover that he is accused of being too moderate.

[Malih] The leadership of Hezbollah has been associated with your name despite your denials. Why was this organization given this name, and is it true that Hezbollah is behind the car-bomb attack on the American Embassy in 'Awkar, as some reports submitted to the American administration have suggested?

[Fadlallah] The claim that I am the leader of Hezbollah is baseless and untrue. I am not the leader of any organization or party. It seems that when they could not find any prominent figure to pin this label on, and when they observed that I was active in the Islamic field, they decided to settle on me. It could be that many of those who are considered to be part of Hezbollah live with us in the mosque and they might have confidence in me. Who is the leader of Hezbollah? Obviously, he is the one who has influence. So, when they cannot see anybody on the scene, no spokesman, no prominent political figure speaking out for Hezbollah, they try to nail it on a specific person, whose name is then linked to every incident.

[Malih] Who is the leader of Hezbollah?

[Fadlallah] You can ask any of the party members. If I were the leader I would have the courage to say so and I would assume my responsibility. I think I can humbly say that my stands demonstrate my personal courage; I have always spoken out plainly. On several occasions I have spoken out strongly. We took a firm public stand against the May 17 agreement, and a firm stand during the presidential elections. Had I been the president or leader of Hezbollah or some other group, I assure you I have enough courage to own up to that fact. It simply is not so.

The media have absolutely no grounds to name me as leader of Hezbollah, but this is part of the tactics on the Lebanese scene.

Hezbollah is a party, just like other parties in Lebanon which resort to the use of arms. It might be responsible for infractions and violations of the law, and they might have made mistakes, even though their mistakes are far less than those of others.

As for the accusation that they were involved in the attack on the embassy, I can only say that I have no knowledge whatsoever of

this operation. I don't think that even the secret service is yet aware of the identity of the perpetrators. We have no idea, and, consequently, cannot say anything.

[Malih] What are your links with the Islamic Jihad and the Islamic al-Da'wah (call) Party?

[Fadlallah] I have repeatedly said that the Islamic Jihad is a mere telephone organization. I still insist on this view. I have never come across anything called the Islamic Jihad all the years I have been in Lebanon. Furthermore, I have no ties or links whatever with the Al-Da'wah Party.

[Malih] What is the true nature of your relations with Nabih Birri, Amal Movement, Shaykh Shams al-Din and Mufti Qabalan?

[Fadlallah] It is a relationship of friendship, agreement and disagreement. In other words, it is a natural relationship. This is especially true of Shaykh Shams al-Din, with whom I have been friends since our childhood days. My relationship with him is both a personal and a working relationship.

[Malih] Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah was the target of several assassination attempts over the years because of his political stands? Could you elaborate on this fact?

[Fadlallah] I might have been the target of assassination attempts at the hands of elements accused of being backed by the Iraqi Ba'th Party, as the result of my opposition to the system of government in Iraq. I consider it to be an oppressive and cruel regime, which unjustly kills people. My position was publicly stated at the time when the Iraqi Ba'th Party was engaged in assassinations in Lebanon.

[Malih] What is your relationship with Imam Khomeyni and the Islamic revolution in Iran, and what is your opinion of this revolution?

[Fadlallah] Imam Khomeyni represents an authority. He is a great and inspiring Islamic leader, and, as such, we hold him in high esteem, and believe that he represents a mature and inspiring Islamic leadership.

The Islamic revolution has managed to rally the people around it, and it is still immensely popular. It is an attempt to apply Islam. It makes mistakes, but it has the courage to admit its mistakes. It is trying to apply Islam to all aspects of life, but I do not think that it is 100 percent successful yet because the changing of society requires time. However, I think that image of the revolution presented by the media is 90 percent distorted.

That is why I said in my lecture at the college of arts that people should visit Iran as tourists, not official guests, to discover the situation as it really is. You will discover that the Iranian regime, with its mistakes, is the most humane regime in the world.

[Malih] What do you think of the call for the abolition of political sectarianism in Lebanon?

[Fadlallah] We believe that political sectarianism is no good for

Lebanon. As such, we feel that its abolition could solve many of Lebanon's problems and could help extricate Lebanon from its present tense situation. Such a move would at least provide temporary relief.

[Malih] How would we then reconcile the Islamic teachings and the status of Moslems in such a state?

[Fadlallah] Just like all people in terms of strategy, I consider all other situations in terms of stages.

[Malih] Is the national resistance movement in the South linked to the concept of Jihad, and, as such, is the resistance confined to Shi'ite southerners?

[Fadlallah] The resistance is nationalistic, and mostly Islamic, in terms of its direction, and is based on the Islamic view that Moslems must defend their land against any invader or usurper. Likewise, they must defend their freedom and independence. As such, the resistance in Lebanon can be considered to be a religious act, as well as being a military act and an act of Jihad. This is why the resistance has mounted despite the difficult and bad economic, political, military and security conditions. There is a spirit of resistance. For the first time, an internal resistance has sprung up that has no external ties and is not sponsored by any regimes. In fact, there is a counter-current in some circles that are afraid of the resistance. This is the first resistance of its kind.

With a Shi'ite majority in the South, and with the Shi'ites bearing the brunt of the occupation, it was only natural that the Shi'ites would be the dominant group in the resistance. There is also resistance from the Sunnites in the area, especially from the youth and the religious scholars. I do not know of any resistance from non-Moslems. I have no idea of any resistance being mounted by the Christians.

[Malih] What do you know about the Saudi Arabian Consulate incident? What is the status of relations between Lebanese Shi'ites and Saudi Arabia?

[Fadlallah] When the Saudi Consulate incident occurred I was in Saudi Arabia on a pilgrimage. As far as I can gather, prior to the incident there was no anti-Saudi political trend as far as the Saudi state was concerned. Saudi Arabia had decided to ban the entry this year of all Lebanese pilgrims, both Shi'ite and Sunnite. It did not want to confront the pilgrims directly, so it was hiding behind the pretext that there was no embassy in Lebanon. The authorities tried to deal with the situation, while the pilgrims kept on waiting for some response until they realized that Saudi Arabia simply did not want them.

According to my information, the incident started off spontaneously in the form of a protest, but in the chaos and confusion things got out of hand following attempts to put up pictures of Imam Khomeyni; and the response of the Saudi security personnel, which ultimately resulted in the burning of the consulate. We regard this as an act of mischief, and believe it might have been the result of misplaced zeal which was exploited by elements that used this zeal to achieve this objective.

In my estimation, Saudi Arabia benefited rather than lost from this situation. Had the protest and sit-in remained peaceful, it would have been an open declaration that Saudi Arabia was restricting the pilgrimage, an accusation that Saudi Arabia is sensitive to. As it worked out, Saudi Arabia was able to claim that it was not preventing pilgrimage to the holy places, even though they had issued a specific decision to that effect.

They issued visas the same day and claimed that they were not restricting pilgrimage, but they cited the Gulf war and the situation in Lebanon.

Naturally, we're not pleased at all with this (attack on the embassy), as I clearly and publicly stated on my return. I do not believe in the burning or the attacking of embassies, and I believe that it only leads to negative results, even internally. I said that publicly even when the Libyan Embassy was attacked, even though that incident had emotional, Shi'ite overtones related to the fate of Imam Sayyid Musa al-Sadr.

I do not believe that this was politically motivated, judging from the conditions which were prevailing prior to my departure on my pilgrimage.

[Malih] What about the relations between the Lebanese Shi'ites and Saudi Arabia?

[Fadlallah] Saudi Arabia has a negative position towards the Shi'ites of the world, including those in Saudi Arabia. The Shi'ites feel this. It is fighting Shi'ism around the world, and has added the political dimension to its other forms of opposition to Shi'ites.

The Shi'ites of Lebanon do not regard Saudi Arabia as an opponent they should be fighting against, and all along, there had been no attack on any Saudi person or establishment by the Shi'ites. The consulate incident was the result of the pilgrimage dispute.

This indicates that the Shi'ites do not have a negative attitude against Saudi (personnel and establishments) in Lebanon. This was a spontaneous incident. As far as I know, there was supposed to be a Shi'ite-Sunnite demonstration, but, at the last minute, the Sunnites withdrew. This is what I was told.

[Malih] How do you evaluate the Syrian role in Lebanon and what is your relationship with Syria?

[Fadlallah] I have no organic ties with Syria at present. Syria's role in Lebanon is based on its political strategy, be it related to its own security or to its foreign policy on the regional level. Consequently, it is hard to separate Syria from its role in Lebanon. This is why we described the May 17 agreement as unrealistic. It was stillborn because it tried to establish a relationship with one side, even though it was well known ahead of time that the Syrian presence in Lebanon would oppose this pact. As such, it was our conviction that the May 17 agreement was designed to polish the image of Israel and to throw the ball into the Syrian court, that it might appear as the obstacle to any solution in Lebanon.

Obviously, the Syrian role in Lebanon is basic and realistic, and emanates from the nature of Lebanese internal conditions and the conditions in the region as a whole.

[Malih] What do you think of National Democratic Front which Walid Junblatt is scheduled to unveil today?

[Fadlallah] It seems to me that any front that is formed as a reaction to certain conditions will not last long. It seems this front has emerged to confront the Jordanian-Egyptian line-up, so it is a reaction to events. Of course, this is in keeping with the attempts of certain Lebanese political parties to carve out a prominent position for themselves on the scene, after a period of relative eclipse due to past events.

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